

**Vayikra and Passover: Case Studies in the Evolution of Religion and Ritual**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet March 21, 2026 3 Nisan 5786**

After *Bereishit* and *Sh'mot*, when we crack the first verses of *Vayikra* it feels we are entering a different world. It is a world that is organized around the service of God in a sanctuary, zones of purity and impurity, holiness in time and holiness in space. The objective of this world, stated as broadly as possible, is for Israel to become a holy people enhancing God's presence in the world. Here are two pithy characterizations to think about over a glass of wine:

*Leviticus (Vayikra) is a manual  
 for the religious organization of reality.*

And: *Leviticus is the classical text of what might be called hard-core Judaism, the Judaism of religious efficiency and spiritual subordination.*<sup>1</sup>

*Vayikra* starts where *Sh'mot* ends, with God's thick smoke-cloud-presence inside the sanctuary, and with Moses outside



at its entrance, unable to enter. That snapshot is itself a hard-

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלָיו מֵאֵהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר.  
 And God called Moses.  
 And God spoke to Moses from the tent of meeting,

core Torah teaching: *is it more important to be with God and risk asphyxiation from the divine smoke, or to breathe fresh air and stay alive?*

Moses, who concludes his legislative life by saying, *Choose life*, demonstrates his credo right here. He opts for staying outside the sanctuary where he can breathe. At the beginning of *Vayikra*, the completed sanctuary is ready for use. The first words of the book are instructions for sacrificial worship:

**אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב**—*The ADAM, the human-being brought into existence by God, is the only being that wants to come close to God.*

What follows is a menu of options as to how to approach

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| <b>Olah-Burnt Offering</b>     |
| <b>Mincha-Cereal Offering</b>  |
| <b>Shelamim-Peace Offering</b> |
| <b>Hatat-Sin Offering</b>      |
| <b>Asham-Guilt Offering</b>    |

God. Each of the different categories of sacrifice, reflect different ways of coming close to God for different reasons. As Jacob Milgrom argues, the menu of sacrifices is an expression of

all bands of experience on the emotional spectrum. The

instructions disclose a precise order and way of sacrificing to God. There is a lot riding on the proper practice, namely God's continued sustenance of the people. Specific people, kohanim, are in charge of the process and an entire economy supports it. *Vayikra* hardly delves into this in detail, but animals, birds, grain, wine, and oil, all need to be procured from somewhere. Water needs to be drawn, firewood needs to be cut, etc. *What this means is that the economy of biblical Israel was not only organized for the basic elements of human sustenance. It was organized for the service of God.* While this book does not contain much in the way of traditional storytelling, with settings, characters, plots, and all the rest, there is a different kind of story here underneath the surface: *Vayikra tells the story of Israel's transition from primitive to organized religious life.* Now, that's an interesting story! Indeed, we have had a few instances of primitive religion up until now. In terms of sacrifice, the patriarchs built a total of seven<sup>2</sup> altars: Abraham built four, Isaac built one and Jacob built two. In *Sh'mot*, Moses built two altars: one after the war with Amalek (Exod. 17:15), and another for the covenant ceremony after the revelation at Sinai (24:4). Aaron built one too, regrettably, for the Golden Calf (32:5). All of this is to demonstrate that prior to the official sanctuary, the founders of our people worshiped God in what was essentially a primitive and improvisational manner. Prior to the Exodus we have no accounts of ordinary Israelites offering sacrifices, but at the Exodus we witness a shift. The Passover sacrifice described in Exodus 12, was to be sacrificed and consumed by everyone in conjunction with a larger family unit. The animal was to be slaughtered at dusk, presumably by the head of the household who, at this particular moment, was acting in a primitive, quasi-priestly role, presumably equipped with the knowledge and skill of how to properly slaughter an animal. In perhaps what can be described as the most primitive element of the original Passover sacrifice, its blood was to be smeared on the entrance of the house (12:7). Why? It becomes clear in all the later rules pertaining to sacrifice that one of the most crucial steps in the process, is to sprinkle the blood of the slaughtered animal on the sides of the altar. *This symbolically purifies the altar and also elevates the sacrificial animal from an ordinary to a sacred status.* The Torah never explains this because the meaning of blood-sprinkling would have been obvious to ancient Israelites. But here's the problem: how would the Israelites in Egypt be able to sacralize their individual sacrifices when they had no altars? God issues Moses a temporary solution: instead of making every head of household go out and build their own altar on the night when they were preparing to

<sup>1</sup> Wieseltier, Leon. "Leviticus." In *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, edited by David Rosenberg, 34, 38. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> To quote *The Incredibles: Coincidence? I think not.* The presence of seven patriarchal altars punctuates the stories of Israel's origins with God's presence.

leave, they would sprinkle or smear blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes. This way, yes, they would indeed render their homes immune from the destroyer of the tenth plague (12:13), **but more importantly, by sprinkling blood on their doorposts they would also transform their homes into temporary, albeit symbolic, sacred altars! Because of that, the Passover sacrifice, consisting of roasted lamb, unleavened flatbread and bitter herbs, would become a sacred meal and not just a banal barbecue.**<sup>3</sup> The Passover sacrifice is a perfect example of a primitive stage in Israel's religious life. However, once we get to *Vayikra*, the primitive, improvisational stage of Israel's worship is over. With the sanctuary fully assembled, there is now one place, one canonical set of rules, and one set of officiants governing the process. Sacrifices could be brought by everyone at various times under various circumstances, but now there would be a whole official sacrificial system operating with an official canonical manual. **The first part of Vayikra is that manual.** The story of *Vayikra* is thus a story of the evolution of religious life.

Evolution is a constant feature of religious life. Rituals and symbols often arise spontaneously or improvisationally, and then, at some point, they gain popularity among a wider audience and eventually become codified or canonized in formal *Vayikra*-like systems. The Seder - coming up in just under two weeks - is the ultimate case-study of this. Here are some examples. **The Signs of the Seder Poem: Kadesh Urchatz.** The recitation of the signs of the Seder, originated most likely in the 14th century. Some date it all the way back to Rashi (1040-1105). Rabbi Menachem Kasher<sup>4</sup> states that the Italian biblical commentator Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) found a version of the *Kadesh-Urchatz* in a manuscript that dating back all the way to 1457, and it claims that this mnemonic was composed by Rabbenu Samuel of Falaise (a Tosafist from the Normandy region of France) in the 13th century. Rabbi Kasher includes no less than 14 (!) other mnemonic poems that map out the Seder indicating that it was probably a great pastime among scholars and poets to compose them. But the present poem, *Kadesh-Urchatz* is the one that became most popular, probably because it is very easy to remember and has a very simple rhyming structure at the end of every second word: **חֶזֶק-חֶזֶק-חֶזֶק-חֶזֶק** and **רַךְ-רַךְ-רַךְ-רַךְ**. What started out as an



improvisation, ended up becoming canonized, and we all sing it today. **Shfokh Hamatkha-Pour Out Your Wrath.** Following the meal, we recite a set of rather tempestuous verses that express our anger at the enemies of the Jewish people throughout the millenia and today. This is a widespread custom that, according to some, goes all the way back to the Talmudic era. However, the choice and number of verses that are recited differed from place to place. In the earliest records, they differed from individual to individual.<sup>5</sup> Today, the text has become fixed. What started out as improvisational is now canonical. **Elijah.** Opening of the door for Elijah probably originated during the time of the Crusades as a way of being on the lookout against informers who would have been listening in on the harsh verses that were being uttered against marauding Gentiles. What started out as improvisation for security, became fixed as a custom and generated numerous meanings. Contemporary Haggadot have added many new improvisational customs at this point

in the Seder. For example, *Feast of Freedom*<sup>6</sup> adds references to the Shoah and the singing of Ani Ma'amin. Noam and Mishael Zion's *A Night to Remember* includes a creative counter text: **Pour out your love on the nations who have known you and on the kingdoms who call upon your name**, in recognition of righteous Gentiles, allies, and people who leap into solidarity with us. **Miriam's Cup.** The placing of a cup filled with water, and reading passages referencing women both in the Passover story and in Jewish history, is a custom that has emerged over the last three decades. What was once an improvisation to reflect a desire to highlight the role of women in the transmission of Judaism has now been "canonized" in many modern Haggadahs. Passover is the laboratory for the unfolding of Jewish tradition. It inspires us to improvise. And who knows? Maybe our innovations will one day become part of the canon as well! Shabbat Shalom!

**This parasha sheet is sponsored by the Weinstein/Dickstein family to commemorate the yearzeits of Marc's father, Ira Weinstein and Stephanie's sister, Reina Kissel z'l.**

**On this 22nd day of war, may God protect the IDF and US forces in their efforts to defeat a tyrannical regime and create a new future for Israel, the Iranian people, the region and the world. AMEN!**

<sup>3</sup> But did they end up eating it? In my opinion, no, they did not. The text records that Pharaoh sent Israel out in the middle of the night, and that they could not wait and bake their dough into matzah to consume at their special sacrificial meal. Instead, they put the dough into their kneading bowls and carried it in their cloaks and baked it into matzah the next day, because miraculously, **it had not yet leavened** (12:39) and was still usable for baking matzah. They did not take any other provisions. Which means they did not take the messy, juicy, smoky, roasting lamb (which was still in one piece and not so easy to carry) with them! And, moreover, it would have been too hot to handle! They

left Egypt on an empty stomach! That, friends, is the real miracle of Passover! **The original Passover feast was a Passover fast.** And like all fasts, it was a symbolic boundary marker. In this case, between death and life, slavery and freedom.

<sup>4</sup> *Haggadah Shlemah - A Critical Edition of the Haggadah, Annotated with Commentary (Hebrew)*. Jerusalem, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah - Its Sources and History (Hebrew)*. Jerusalem, 1981. p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> The Rabbinical Assembly Haggadah, edited by Rachel Anne Rabinowitz, 1982.